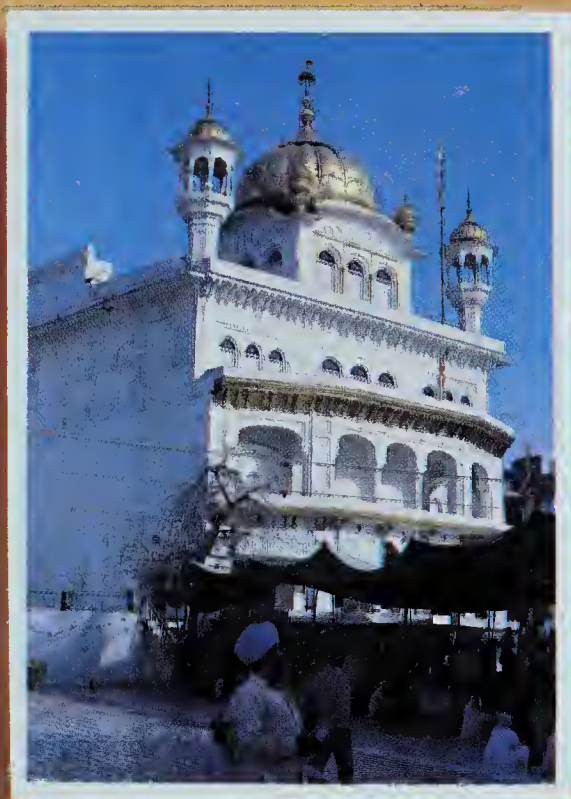
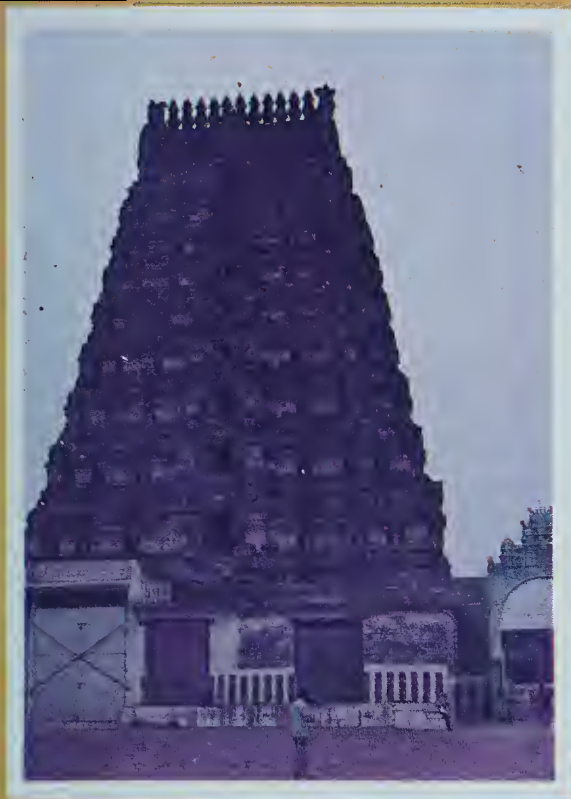



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# **PILGRIM PLACES OF INDIA**



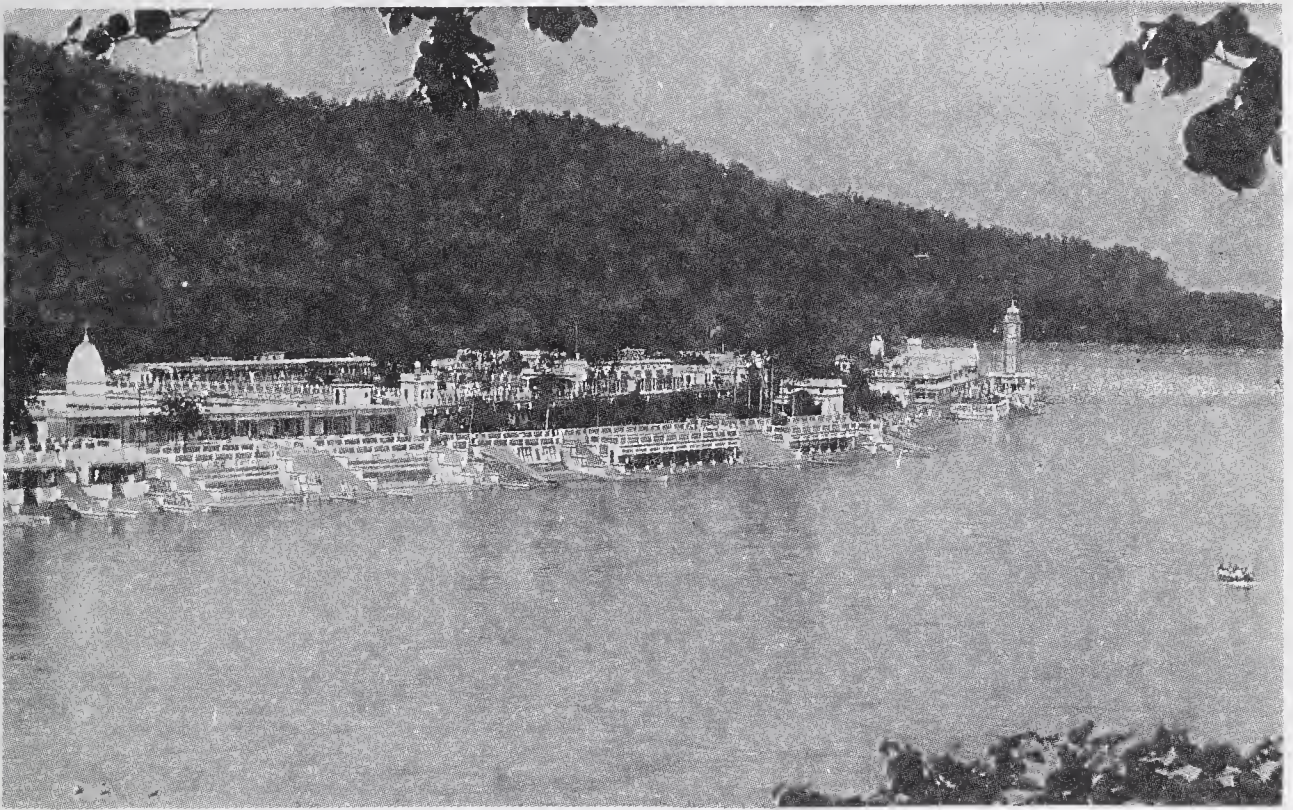


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# PILGRIM PLACES OF INDIA



PRABHAT PRAKASHAN

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## PRAYAG

Prayag, situated at the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna, is known as the *tirathraj* or the 'holiest of the holies'. Legend has it that Brahma, the God of Creation, performed a big *yajna*, and one of the *vedis* was located here. It is believed that the river Saraswati once merged into the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna, and hence the place is also called the *Triveni Sangam*.

Situated at the confluence of these rivers, Prayag had developed sound transportation facilities, since rivers were the major means of transportation in ancient India. Thanks to these facilities, Prayag was considered to be strategically situated for warfare. As such, Akbar, the Great Moghul Emperor, had set his eyes on the city of Prayag and wanted to make it the Capital of his empire. In fact, he laid the foundation stone of a fort which is a living testimony to the importance that the city enjoyed in his time. Akbar was so fascinated by this city that he renamed it as Allahabas, or the place where Allah, the God, resides or the 'Abode of Allah'. With the passage of time, this Allahabas came to be known as Allahabad.

*Puranas* sing paeans in praise of Prayag, and it is believed that a person who takes bath in the *Sangam* (confluence) is absolved of all his sins. The great poet, Tulsidas, who authored the immortal epic 'Ramayana', says that the glory of Prayag beggars description :

"Ko kahi sakai Prayag prabhau  
Kalush-punj kunjar mrig-rau"

There are many *ghats* on the banks of the Ganga and the Yamuna in Prayag, the prominent ones among them being Saraswati, Barua, Triveni and Ramghat. Saraswati ghat, situated by the side of Akbar's fort, is also known as Saraswati Koop. Besides, what adds to the sanctity and renown of Prayag are the 12-yearly *Kumbh* and the six-yearly *Ardh Kumbh* fairs. Millions of pilgrims from every nook and corner of the country throng Prayag to take a







dip in the holy waters at the *Sangam* and seek forgiveness for their sins.

One comes across an anecdote about the *Kumbh*. Legend has it that at the time of churning of the ocean by the gods and the demons, an *amrit kalash* (pitcher full of nectar) surfaced the ocean bed. Both, the gods and the demons, rushed to grab the pitcher. Lord Vishnu motioned Indra's son, Jayant, to take the pitcher under the supervision of Brihaspati. Lord Vishnu also sent the Sun and the Moon to lend a helping hand in protecting the pitcher from the demons. It is said that they scampered around the earth for twelve days with the pitcher to protect it from the *asuras* (demons). The *amrit kalash* had to be lodged at four places during this period, viz., Prayag, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik, where some drops of the nectar got spilled over, and sanctified these places. The twelve days correspond to twelve man-years. Therefore, when the Sun, the Moon and the Brihaspati are aptly positioned, the *Kumbh* fair is held at the above four places after a 12-year interval.

In Prayag, the *Kumbh* fair is held when the Brihaspati enters *Vrishha rashi* and the Sun and the Moon enter *makar rashi*. The fair is attended by the Hindu saints and the sages from all over the country, who converge on the *Sangam* along with their entourage. They take out elaborate processions with great gusto and fanfare, and the chiefs of the sects take their positions in a pre-determined order, that is, Nirvani followed by Niranjani, Juna, Bairagi, Digambar, Nirmohi, Udasi, Nirmala and the others, in that order. A sort of a big township comes up on the banks of the Ganga in Prayag on the occasion. The *Vaishnavaits* have their *Vishnu-Lakshmi Peeth*, and the *Shaivait*s and *Shaktas* their *Siddha Peeth* in Prayag. That is why Prayag is also known as *Shakti Peeth* whose presiding deities are Mother Lalita Devi and Bhairav Baba.

# VARANASI

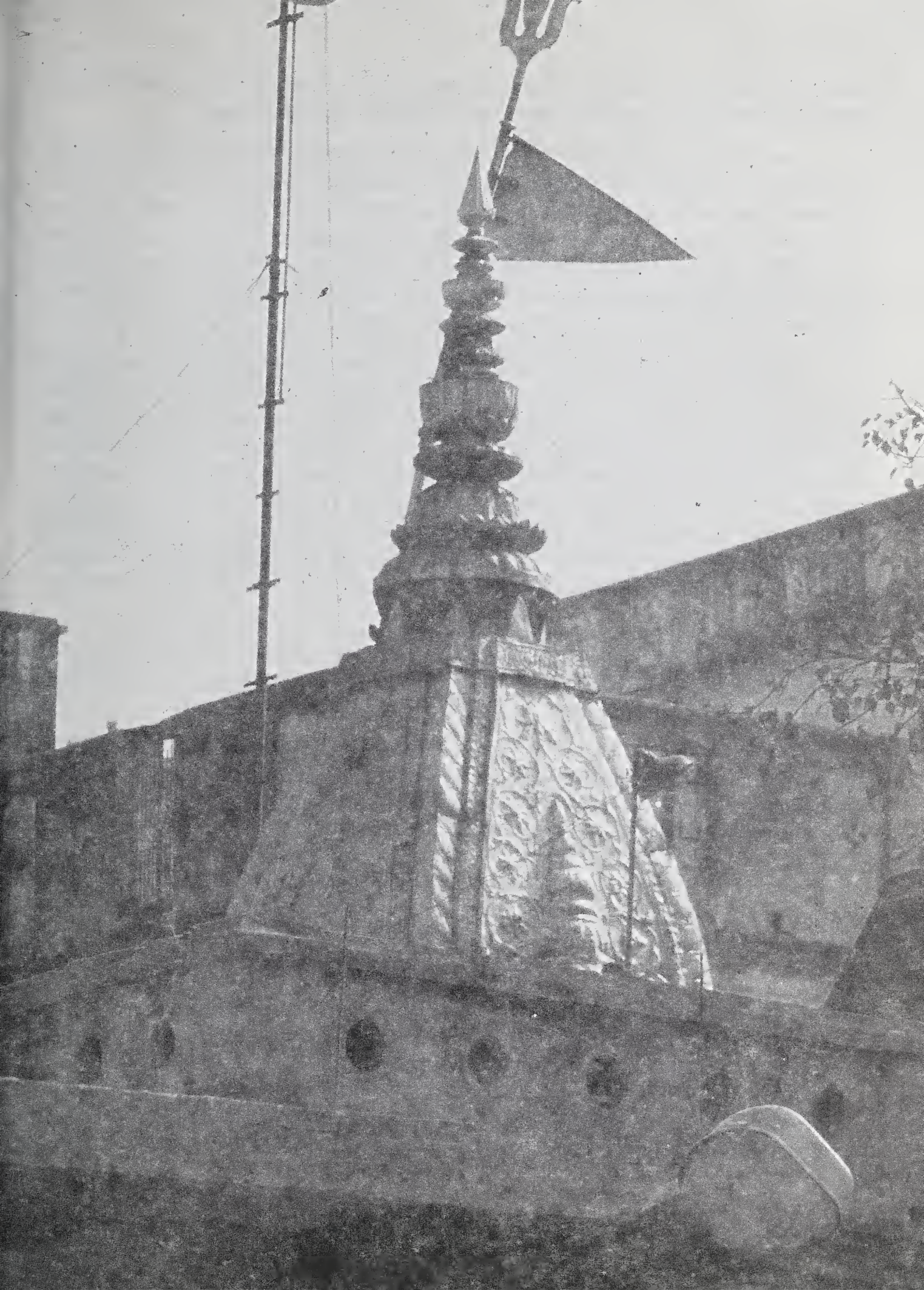
Varanasi is an ancient and holy place in India. It is much more than just a city, in that it represents a culture that is distinctively unique. Besides, it is a famous pilgrim centre. Hindus all over the world consider it a rare privilege of life to visit varanasi which, according to them, is the greatest of all the *tirthas*.

Benaras is another name for Varanasi. Incidentally, the city is known by several other names, viz. Kashi, Anand Kanan etc. It is said that in ancient times, two rivers, Varuna and Asi, flowed in the north and south of the city, and placed in-between the two, it came to be known as Varanasi. The ancient city was founded by King Kasha, whence the name Kashi. According to Pauranic legends, this holy place assumed the appellation '*Avimukta*' (unabandoned) because Lord Shiva never abandoned the city. The devout very strongly believe that the city is the permanent abode of Lord Shiva, whom they worship with utmost devotion. There is an old saying that even a *kankar* (gravel) of Kashi is the incarnation of Shankar, or Lord Shiva. Since Varanasi is the chosen abode of Lord Shiva, it is also known as *Anand Kanan* or the 'Forest of Pleasure'.

Since time immemorial, Kashi has been a seat of learning. It had the proud privilege of producing lakhs of scholars of great name and fame. Likewise, it has also been and still is famous for being the sacred city of eminent Yogis. Great men like Mahamahapadhyaya Gopinath Kaviraj, Tailang Swamy, Dr. Bhagwandass, Mahamana Madan Mohan Malviya etc. enhanced the prestige of Varanasi a great deal. It was from here that the great revolutionary Chandrashekhar Azad had become famous as the patriot student.

Popular legend corroborates the belief that Lord Shiva lives in the city perennially. In ancient times, Divodas, grandson of Dhanvantari, killed one hundred sons of the invader Bhadrashrenya and annexed Varanasi. This angered Shiva, who sent his lieutenant (or, *gana*), Nikumbh, to set things right.







Nikumbh killed Divodas, and Kashi lay desolate for thousands of years thereafter, till Lord Shiva himself decided to take an abode there.

Lord Vishwanath is the protecting deity of Kashi. His temple is the holiest in the city. It was built by Queen Ahilyabai towards the end of the Eighteenth century. Like the other thousand temples, this temple, too, was destroyed by the Muslim invaders. Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb got a mosque constructed out of the remnants of the temple and changed the name of the city from Kashi to Mohammadabad. Near that mosque, a part of the ancient Vishwanath temple still exists where devotees worship daily.

In the early hours of the morning; one can almost feel the divinity of the place at the *ghats* of Varanasi. Manikarnika and Dashashwamedh *ghats* are the hub of religious activities. As the story goes, once Lord Vishnu dug up a canal here with his *chakra* (wheel) and filled it up with his sweat. Thereafter, he went into penance for 1050 years. This impressed Lord Shiva, who came there and nodded his head in approval. A gem-studded ear-ring ('manikarnika') of Lord Shiva fell into the canal when the Lord nodded his head, and the place came to be called Manikarnika. With Manikarnika as the centre, a *panch kroshi* (or 50 mile long) pilgrimage is undertaken here by the devout.

About a mile from the Vishwanath temple is situated the Bhairavnath temple. Bhairav protects Kashi from all evils and keeps a long and thick staff made of stone by his side for the purpose. A dog is his mount.

Varanasi is, all told, a prominent centre of devotion, piety, knowledge etc. for the Indians. Vishwanath, or Vishweshwar, being one of the twelve *gyotir-lingas*, makes the city of Varanasi all the more sacred. Besides, it is one of the seven sacred puris in India.

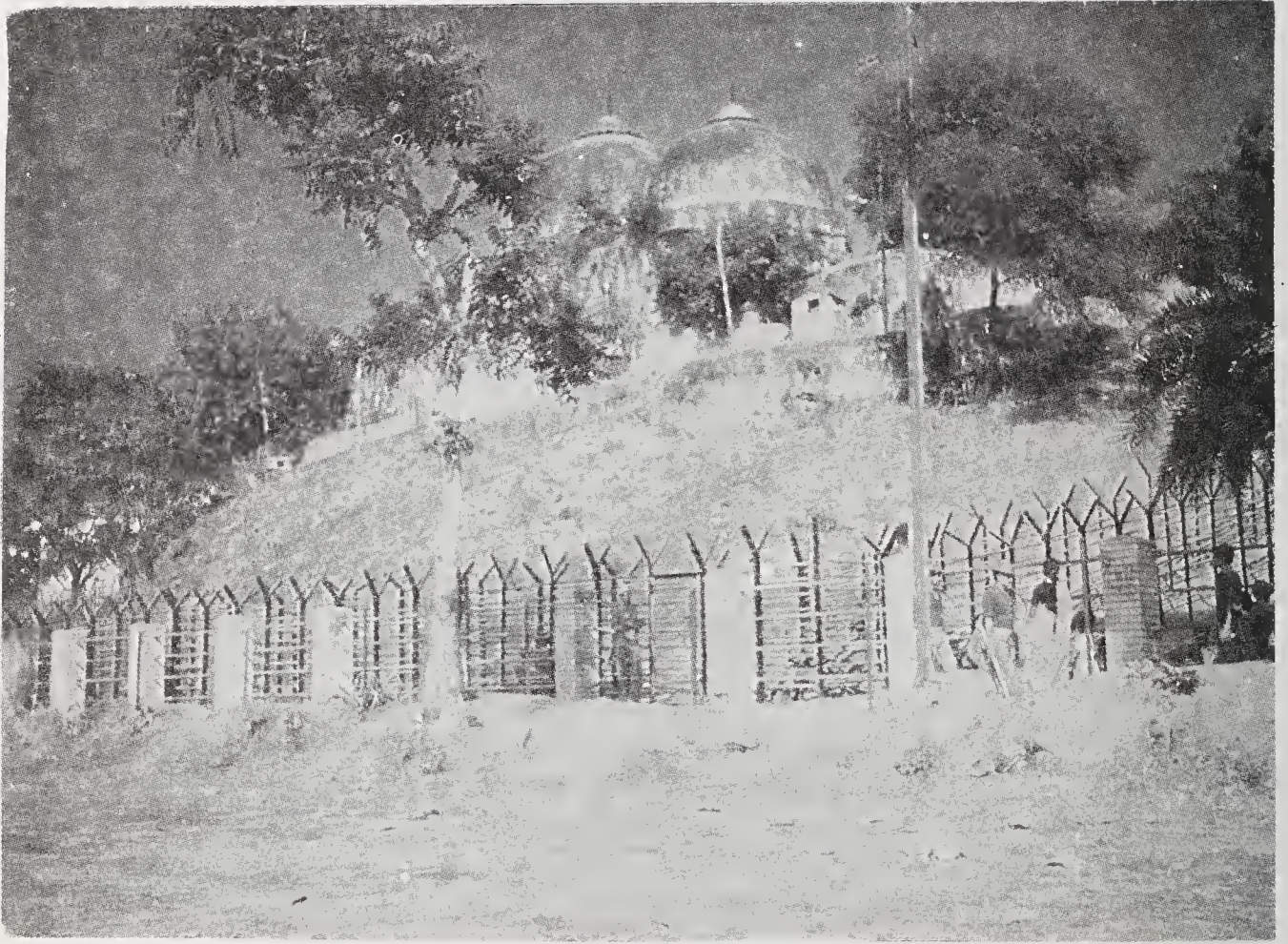


## AYODHYA

Ayodhya is a place sacred to *Vaishnavaits* and has a number of Vaishnava temples. Located on the bank of river Sarayu, Ayodhya is an ancient and prominent city of India. The city is also known by various names such as Nandini, Satya, Kosala, Brahmapuri etc., but Saket and Avadhpuri are two of its better known names. The word *Ayodhya* denotes a place or a people not given to fighting. The *Puranas* testify that no battles were fought in Ayodhya. How and when *Ayodhya* changed into *Avadh* is difficult to say, but it is certain that by the time Emperor Akbar was reigning in Delhi, the name 'Avadh' had replaced 'Ayodhya'. The saint-poet Tulsidas has invariably used the name 'Avadh' in his immortal classic 'Ram Charita Manas'

Lord Rama was born in Ayodhya. Therefore, the city, besides being the birth-place of the Lord, grants *moksha* since the Lord is present in every particle of the place. The whole of Ayodhya is the heart of Mother Goddess, and the devout take a round or *parikrama* of the city. It is a city of temples, the majority (almost eighty per cent) belonging to *Ramanandi Vaishnavaits*. Kanak Bhavan, Hanuman Garhi, Sita Rasoi, Kaushalya Bhavan, Kaikeyi Kop Bhavan, Sumitra Bhavan, Ratna Sinhasan, Lakshman Qila and Shri Rama Janmabhoomi Mandir are some of the more famous temples in the city. Of them all, Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple is considered to be the most sacred and has, of late, been a topic of much discussion. It is said that the temple was built by Emperor Vikramaditya, and had eighty four pillars of black stone and a number of beautiful, towering spires. In 1528 A.D., Babar demolished the temple and raised a mosque in its place.

Long afterwards, Hindus and Muslims both, considered it as a hallowed place, and continued to worship it. Subsequently, a plan was chalked out for reconstructing the Rama Janmabhoomi Temple *de novo*, and thousands of devotees assembled in Ayodhya on the 6th December, 1992 to have a *darshan* of Ramlalla. In the ensuing melee, the dilapidated mosque tumbled down. A makeshift temple has been constructed at the site of Shri Rama's



birth where devotees perform the *puja*. Thousands of devotees come here everyday to have *darshan* of Shri Ramlalla, and on the day of Ramanavami, millions throng this place to have a glimpse of the deity.



## MATHURA

Mathura is known all over the world as the birth-place of Lord Krishna, and is one of the seven holy cities of India. Though prominently a pilgrim centre of the Hindus, the place is equally sacred to the Buddhists and the Jains. In olden days, Mathura was also known as 'Madhura' and 'Madhupuri'. It is said that at one time Mathura was the Capital of Lavanasur till Shatrughna killed him and resettled the city. According to the Ramayana, even the gods were attracted by the splendour of the city. In the times of Lord Krishna, Mathura was ruled by Kansa, who was killed by the Lord. The city and its adjoining areas have always been famous for the beautiful breed of cows that were found there.

Emperor Ashoka built three stupas, five temples and twenty *sangharams* or *viharas* peopled by over two thousand Buddhists. Just as in Ayodhya we find a good number of temples, buildings and palaces associated with Lord Rama and other characters of Ramayana, so Mathura abounds in temples of Lord Krishna. Almost all the temples are adorned by the idols of Radha and Krishna. Dwarkadheesh temple is the most famous of them all. It is situated in the heart of the city at Asi Kunda Bazar and was built by Seth Gokuldas Parikh of Gwalior in 1814-15. It is adorned by the four-armed idol of Krishna, the Ruler of Dwarka. It also houses Sanskrit School which imparts education upto the level of *acharya*. Gat-shramnarayan, Govardhan-nath and Bihariji are some of the other worth-seeing temples in Mathura.

Perhaps the holiest place in Mathura is the place where Lord Krishna was born. It is said that over 5000 years ago, Krishna was born in the prison of Kansa. There was a beautiful Krishna Janmabhoomi Temple at the site, which was demolished by Aurangzeb to build a mosque.

Mathura, or *Braj Mandal*, is spread over an area of eighty four *kosas*. It encompasses many smaller pilgrim points. Vrindavan is the most important among these. It is situated at about ten kilometres north-west of Mathura. It



is a place where Lord Krishna revelled in his divine sport. There is superabundance of temples here, with every street boasting of one temple or the other. Birla Mandir, Banke-Bihari Mandir etc. are some of the famous temples of Mathura. Thirty kilometres from Vrindavan is located Mount Govardharī, which Krishna had lifted on his small finger to protect the *gop-gwalas* (the cowherdsmen) from unprecedented storm and thunder caused by the ire of Indra. Gokul is the third important *tirtha* of Mathura, and is the place where Krishna had spent his childhood days.

The temples, *ghats*, fairs and festivals, and *parikramas* in the holy city of Mathura have a special significance for the Hindus because they speak of a happy and colourful life of the people of the days gone by, and going around the temples—*parikramas*—brings the devotees closer to their deity.



## KEDARNATH

Kedarnath is holy to both, *Vaishnavaits* and *Shaivaits*. The  *jyotirlinga*  of this shrine is one of the twelve renowned  *jyotirlingams*  of Lord Shiva. It lends a special sanctity to the place. The temple is situated atop the Kedar hill and is, therefore, also known as 'Kedareshwar'. Legend has it that in the  *satyuga* , Upamanyu worshipped Lord Shiva at this place. It is also believed to be the place where the Pandavas came after the battle of Mahabharata, underwent penance and built a temple. According to the Puranas, sages Nara and Narayan underwent penance at Badrikashram (present-day Badrinath) and worshipped a  *shivalinga*  made of stone or mud. Pleased with their penance, Lord Shiva asked them to seek a boon. The sages replied, "O Lord. You have to come all the way from Mount Kailash daily to accept our prayers. Please stay near us. This will also enable all other people to have the benefit of your  *darshan* ". The Lord, therefore, took abode atop Mount Kedar about 42 kms. away from Badrinath in the form of a  *jyotirlinga* . Subsequently, the Pandavas built a temple here. The present temple at Kedarnath was probably built by Adi Shankaracharya.

The temple, atop Mount Kedar, overlooks the beautiful valley of the sacred Mandakini river, and looks like its crown. The adjoining area of the temple is known as  *Kedar-dham* . A large idol of the river adorns the gateway of the Kedarnath temple. Inside the temple, there is no sculpted icon of Kedarnath; there is just a large triangular rock projection. It is said that its one portion is in Kedarnath and the other in Pashupatinath in Kathmandu (Nepal). The temple also has the idols of Parvati, Pandavas, Kunti, Draupadi and Ganapati. Going around the temple — or doing a  *parikrama*  — is a part of the ritual. The holy places of Amrit Kund, Hans Kund, Ishan Kund, Retas Kund, Madhu Ganga, Ksheer Ganga and Vasuki Tal lie close to the temple.

Next to Kedarnath is located another holy place, Ukhimath, known as the representative  *tirtha*  of Kedardham. In winter, when Kedardham is covered by snow, a movable idol of Kedarnath is brought to Ukhimath, where



it is worshipped throughout the winter. In the Shiva temple of Ukhimath, one also finds idols of Badrinath, Tungnath, Onkareshwar, Kedarnath, Usha and Aniruddha, besides the presiding idol of Siva.



## BADRINATH

Badri Dham, located between the Nar and Narayan mountains, is a very sacred shrine. Earlier it was a forest of berries, from where it got its name : *badri* (berry) and *van* (forest). Another meaning of *badri* is a cloud. Here, even in clear weather, the sky looks overcast with clouds, hence perhaps the name 'Badridham'. The place came to be known as 'Badrinath' most probably during the time of Shankaracharya, who treated it as one of the prominent shrines (*dhams*) of Northern India.

Sage Vyasa's *Ashrama* in Badrinath has also added to its holiness. It is said that the sage underwent penance and wrote his famous treatise 'Brahmasutra' here, which explains why he was called 'Badarayan'. There is a legend that two sages, Nar and Narayana, underwent severe penance here. Pleased with their penance, Lord Vishnu appeared before them and blessed them. These sages installed a very large and grand idol of the Lord in the form of Badrinath. When Buddhism, transcending the borders of India, was gaining a foothold in Tibet and China, some Buddhists removed the idol of Badrinath from the temple and threw it in the Narad-kund. Afterwards, when Adi Shankaracharya revived Hinduism and preached Vedic thought and philosophy, they took out the idol from Narad-kund and reinstalled it in the Garuda Cave. Thereafter a king of Garhwal got the present Badrinath temple constructed here, for which Rani Ahilyabai of Indore donated the golden spire.

To the north of Badrinath flows the river Alakhnanda. On its right bank is the famous *Brahm Tal*, a visit to which is a 'must' for the pilgrims. Many pilgrims perform *shraddhas* for their dead forefathers here. On the left bank of Alakhnanda stands the temple of Narayana. This 45-foot tall temple has



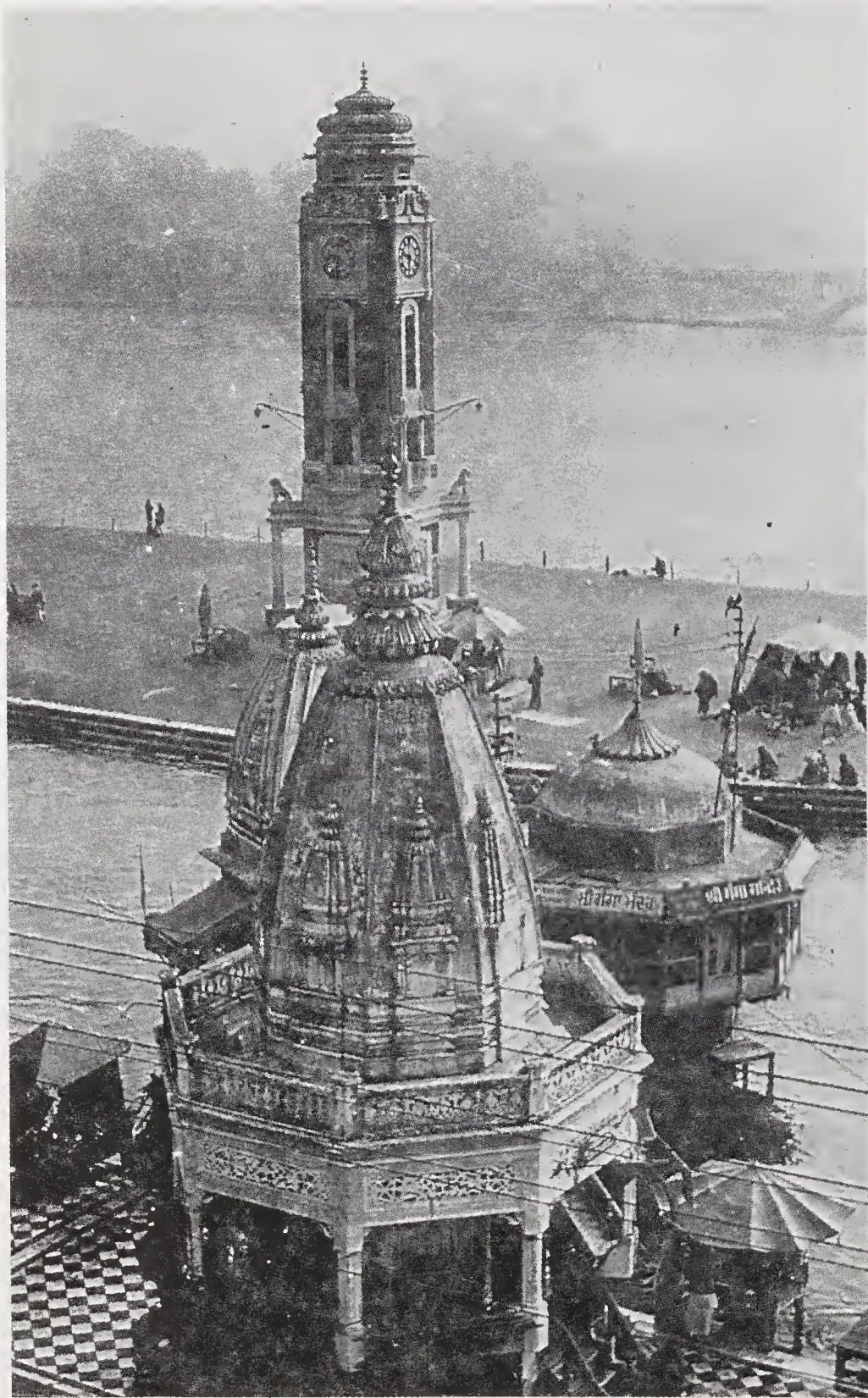
a spire of gold and, inside the temple, there is a beautiful idol of Narayana. The idol is almost three feet high and is made of black 'shaligram' stone. Also enshrined in the temple are the idols of Garuda and Kubera.



## HARIDWAR

Haridwar is an important pilgrim centre of the Hindus and one of the seven holy places that promise 'moksha' or salvation to the devout. It is also known as Mayanagari. Originating from the Himalayas, the Ganga enters the plains for the first time at Haridwar. It is, therefore, also known as '*Ganga dwar*' or the Gateway of Ganga. Being associated with Lord Shiva, the city is also known as '*Har-dwar*' or the Gateway to Shiva. The city is also in some way associated with Vishnu or 'Hari', hence the more common name 'Haridwar'. It would not be wrong to call it '*Harihar Nagar*' (Vishnu-Shiva City).

In ancient times Lord Brahma had performed a very elaborate *yagna* here. *Brahma-kund* is the legacy of that *yagna*, and the devout take a bath in it. Next to it is the *Har ki Pauri* (or 'Steps of Shiva'), where every twelfth year a *Kumbh* and every intervening sixth year an *Ardh Kumbh* (Half Kumbh) fairs are held. Every day at break of dusk, *aarati* of the Mother Ganga is performed at the site, after which *diyas* (earthen lamps) are set afloat on the waters of Ganga. The spectacle is breathtakingly beautiful. By the side of Har-ki-Pauri is a sacred pond known as 'Bhim Goda'. It is said that Bhim once tried to mount a horse here, and the horse slipped creating a pond-like crater. That pond is the present day 'Bhimgoda Tal' (or Reservoir). There is a popular belief that king Bhartrihari underwent penance at Haridwar and achieved immortality. Har-ki-Pauri was constructed by king Vikramaditya in the memory of king Bhartihari.





## BODH GAYA

About fifteen kilometres away from Gaya is situated the Buddhist shrine—Bodh Gaya. Though it forms part of Gaya, the two places have diverse significance for two different faiths. It is believed that Gautam Buddha underwent penance under a banyan tree in Bodh Gaya. After prolonged penance, he attained enlightenment (*bodh*) here. Hence this place came to be known as 'Bodh Gaya', and the banyan tree under which he underwent penance as 'the Bodhi Tree'.

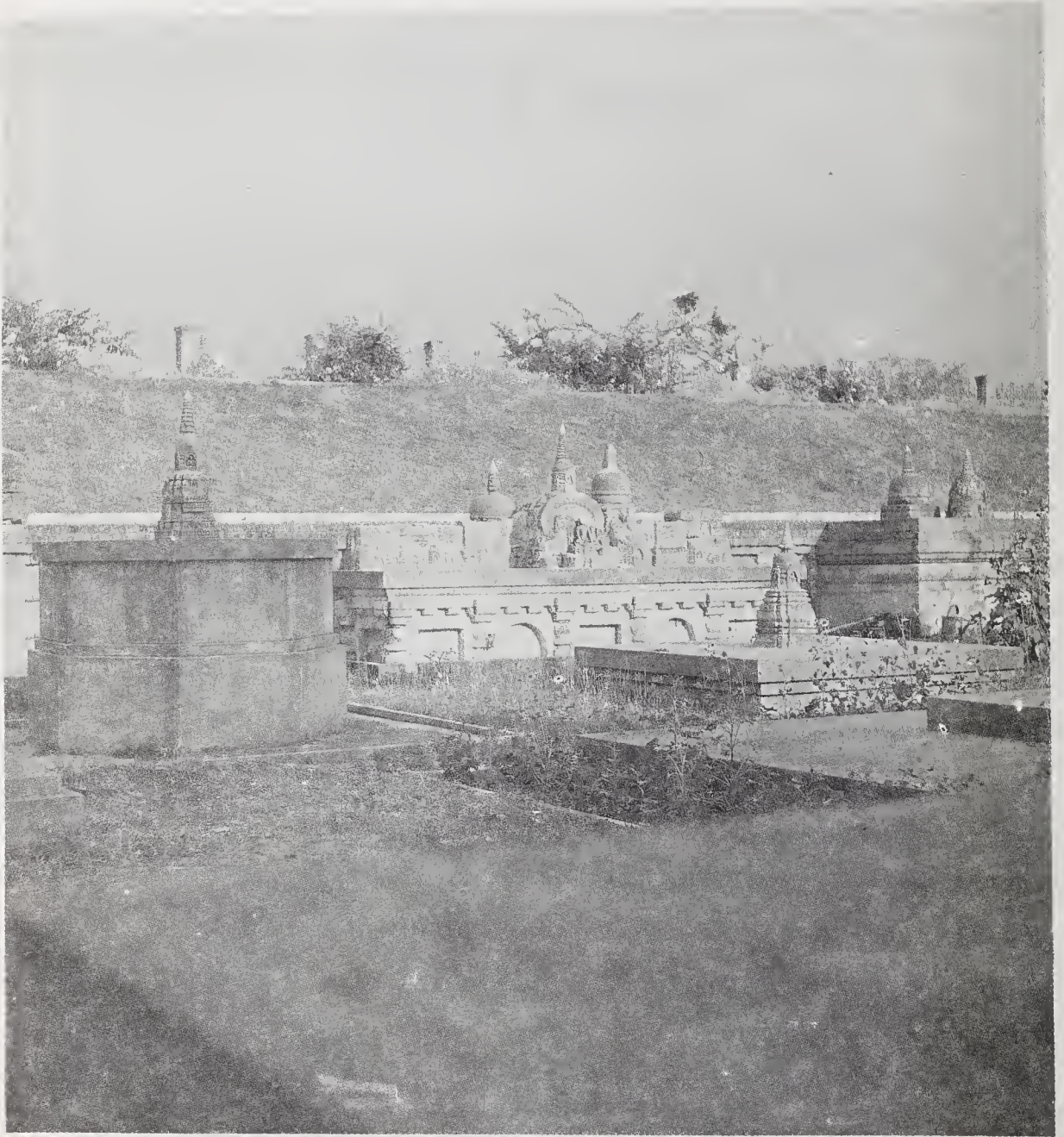
With the spread of Buddhism to various parts of the world, Bodh Gaya's fame as a Buddhist shrine also spread far and wide. Thousands of Buddhist pilgrims from China, Myanmar, Tibet, Thailand, Japan and other countries visit this place every year. Buddhist monks of these countries have built numerous *viharas* here as per the style of their countries. The place where the Buddha underwent penance has been converted into a sprawling temple, known as Mahabodhi Temple. It is the holiest shrine for the Buddhists. A beautiful idol of Buddha adorns the temple. It has a very high spire, and the walls have carvings depicting various incidents from the life of the Buddha. Next to the temple is a museum which has bronze, gold and stone idols of the Buddha.

In the vicinity of the temple, there is another sacred shrine—*Animesh Lochan Chaitya*. It is believed that, after attaining enlightenment, the Buddha had first of all visited this place and was entranced to see the Bodhi Tree.

Chankraman is the third holy shrine of Bodh Gaya where the Buddha strolled up and down for a long time in a state of indecision for he was not sure whether to share his knowledge with others or not.

The Bodhi Tree on the bank of river Neeranjana in Bodh Gaya owes its sanctity to the fact that the Buddha had attained enlightenment beneath this tree.

The Tibetan Vihar is also a sacred place of Bodh Gaya. The devotees



take three rounds of it in the belief that this act would cleanse them of all their sins.

Bodh Gaya is the seat of the famous Magadh University where subjects like History, Culture and Philosophy are taught.



## JAGANNATHPURI

Jagannathpuri is one of the four famous *dhams* of India. It is known as 'Purushottam Tirtha' also. Situated on sea beach in the State of Orissa, the city was known by the name of 'Utkala' in the olden times.

A Puranic legend has it that king Indradumna once ruled over Avanti (Ujjain). He was a learned and religious man devoted to Lord Vishnu. Once a *sadhu* told the king that there was a beautiful icon of Lord Vishnu, known as 'Neel Madhava', on the top of Mount Neelanchal on the sea shore of Utkala. Without losing time, the king took along some priests and, with a large army, reached the place. There the king performed *Ashwamedha yagna* and built a temple. He wanted to instal the idol of 'Neel Madhava' in that temple, but God appeared to him in a dream that night and told him to go the next morning to the sea shore and cut down the banyan tree standing there with an axe. The king did so. Two Brahmins appeared on the spot and carved the idols of Krishna, Balaram and Subhadra from the wood of the tree. These idols were placed in the temple. Lord Vishnu blessed the king and told him that the place would be revered all over the world from then onwards, and would be known as Jagannathpuri. The divinity of the place today is beyond question. The temple built by King Indradumna was embellished and enlarged by later day kings, and some portions of the temple were even reconstructed.

Jagannath Dham has 120 temples, thirteen of which are dedicated to Lord Shiva and the rest to other deities. The main temple complex of Jagannath consists of four sections, which are :

- |     |                    |   |
|-----|--------------------|---|
| i.  | <i>Bhog Mandir</i> | where food is offered to the Lord. It was built by king Purushottam Dev.                                  |
| ii. | <i>Nat Mandir</i>  | also called 'Nritya Mandap' or 'Jagmohan Mandap' where singing, dancing and chanting of hymns take place. |



iii. *Jagannath Mandir*

where the devotees assemble. It is also known as 'Makh-shala', it was built by king Pratap Rudra.

iv. *Sanctum Sanctorum*

where the idols are installed.

The unique feature of this temple is that it is open to all castes and classes of society since Jagannath is the deity of one and all. Devotees receive the Lord's *bhog* with great reverence. The *bhog* is cooked by 400 Brahmin cooks. Rice (*bhat*) is the main *bhog* (food) of Lord Jagannath.

Three kinds of *bhog* or food are prepared in the temple. Jagannath's (or Krishna's) *bhog* is simple, and consists of rice (*bhat*); whereas Balaram's *bhog* consists of *khir*, and that of Subhadra of other delicacies.





The *Rath Yatra* (Chariot Festival) is the main attraction of Puri. The festival commences on the second day of *Ashadha shukla*, and is one of the 24 grand festivals of Puri. Idols of Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra are placed in a chariot (or *rath*) and taken to the Gramin Bhavan of Jagannath situated at a distance of about two miles. The *Rath* is hauled by the devotees, and every devotee nurtures the fond hope of hauling the Lord's *rath*, even for a little while. Then there is the return *rath* journey after ten days. The spectacle is magnificent. The return journey is known as *Uta Rath* or the Reversed Chariot. Millions throng to take part in this Rath Yatra or the Chariot Festival, which at times results in a stampede, and accidents take place. The management of the temple has now been taken over by the Government of Orissa, which has taken adequate steps to minimise such accidents.

## RAMESHWARAM

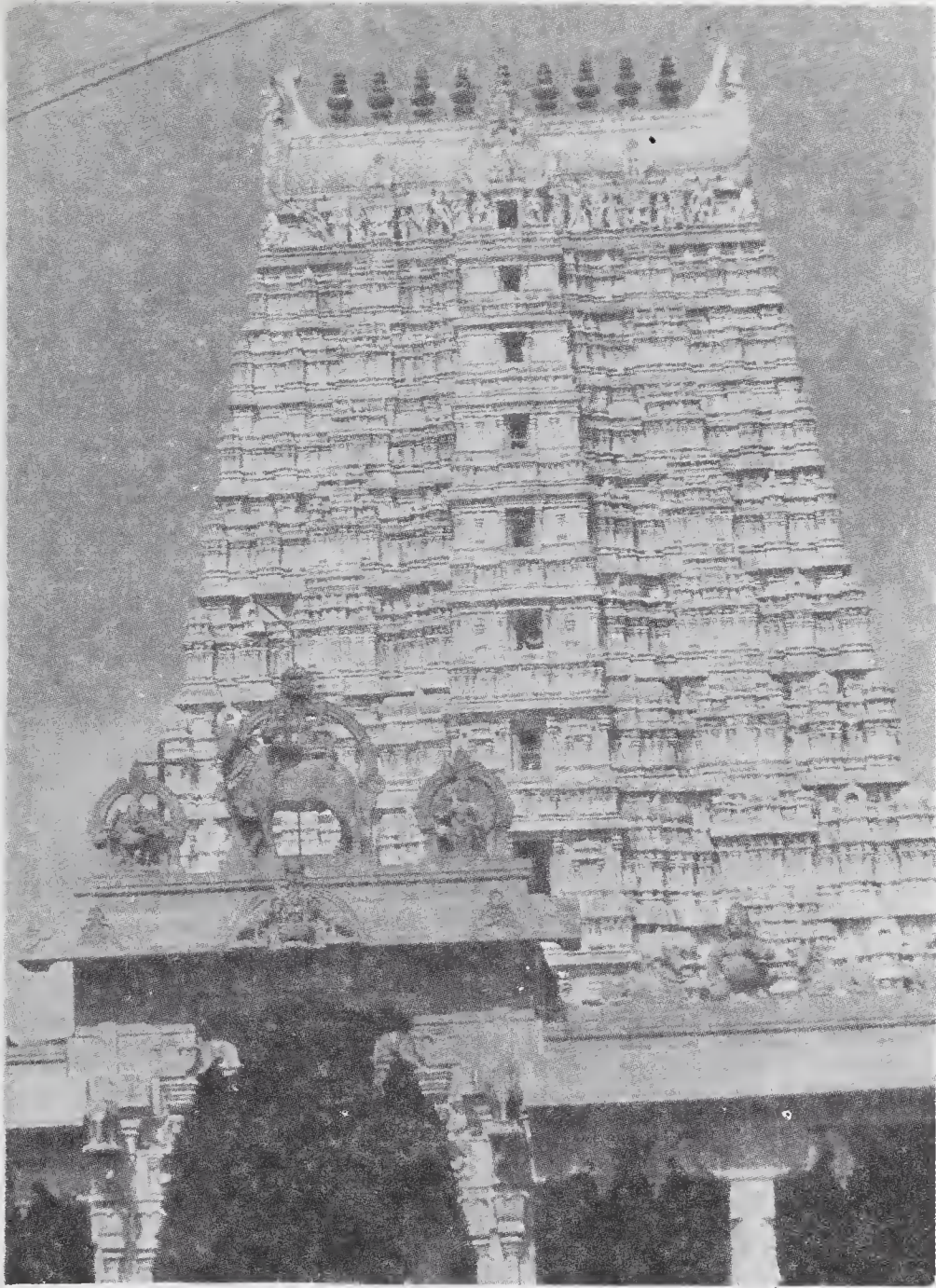
Rameshwaram is one of the four holy *dhams* of India. It is situated in the District Ramanathapuram of Tamilnadu. It is a revered place for the Hindus, and one of the twelve *Jyotirlingas* of Lord Shiva is installed here. It is believed that this *jyotirlinga* was installed here by Lord Rama himself.

After Sita was kidnapped, Rama prepared to attack Lanka with the help of Sugriv's army. The first hurdle was to cross the ocean to reach Lanka. Lord Rama pitched his camp at Rameshwaram, and asked the ocean to give a passage to reach Lanka, but the ocean refused to oblige. This enraged Rama, and he took up his bow to dry up the ocean. Upon this, the ocean presented himself before the Lord in the guise of a Brahmin, and persuaded Rama to build a bridge across the ocean rather than drying it, and reach Lanka. Rama agreed and deputed Nal and Neel to build the bridge. Nal and Neel, who were renowned architects of their time, started the work, and, before long, a bridge of stone and wood was built across the ocean. Rama and his army crossed the ocean by this bridge.

In the battle that followed, Rama killed Ravana and returned to Rameshwaram along with Sita. It was here that Sita had gone through an ordeal by entering fire. Agastya and other sages advised Rama to undergo penance, since killing Ravana, who was a *Brahmin*, amounted to *Brahm-hatya* (killing of a Brahmin). The *rishis* proclaimed that if Rama installed a *Jyotirlinga* there, he would be absolved of the sin of *Brama-hatya*. Rama sent Hanuman to Kailash Mountain to bring the *jyotirlinga*. Hanuman got delayed and the auspicious moment of installing the *jyotirlinga* was running out. Rama, therefore, installed a *jyotirlinga* made of sand, which subsequently came to be known as 'Rameshwar'.

At this time, Hanuman also brought a *jyotirlinga*, which Rama installed next to the one of sand. He also pronounced that the *jyotirlinga* brought by





Hanuman would be worshipped first, and the one made of sand afterwards. This has been the tradition there ever since. Since installing and worshipping a *jyotirlinga* absolved Rama of the sin of *Brahma-hatya*, it came to be believed that worshipping the *jyotirlinga* in Rameshwaram can wash off even the most heinous of the sins such as the sin of *Brahma-hatya*.

The existing temple is on the eastern shore of Rameshwaram. The *gopuram* at the main gate of the temple rises 100 feet, and the temple has a gold-plated Garuda pillar. There is also a huge statue of Nandi. The corridor of the temple is about 4,000 feet long, 17 to 21 feet wide and 30 feet high. Perhaps no other temple corridor in India approaches these dimensions.

The temple at Rameshwaram is a fine specimen of Dravidian architecture. Major portion of the temple was built in the twelfth century, and later-day kings have added to its style and grandeur. The temple is also known as Ramanathaswami Temple.



## KANCHIPURAM

Kanjivaram (old name Kanchi or Kanchipuram) is situated about 45 kilometres to the south-west of Madras. Besides being one of the seven *moksha*-granting cities of India, it is one of the oldest cities of South India. Legend has it that Lord Brahma had undergone penance here in order to have *darshan* of the Goddess. Kanchi is also regarded as one of the famous 52 *Shakti-peethas*. There goes a story about it in the Puranas. Once Prajapati Daksha performed a *yagna*, but did not invite his son-in-law, Shankar, to participate in it. Sati, however, attended the *yagna* of his father and seeing her consort's share missing in the offerings and hearing the humiliating remarks of her father about Shiva, Sati forsook her life.

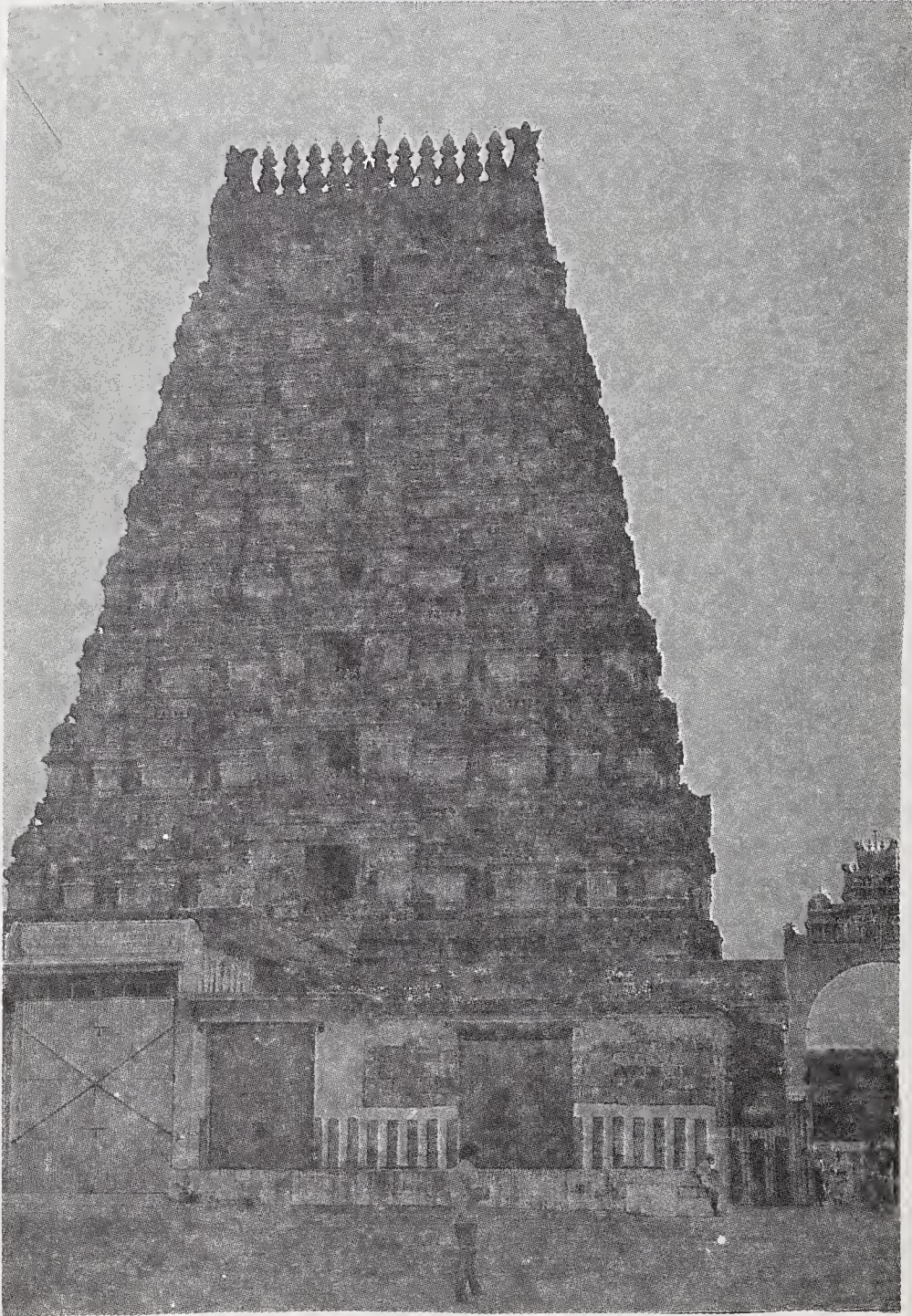
Enraged at this, Shiva's *ganas* disrupted the *yagna*. Shiva came himself and beheaded Daksha. Shiva heaved Sati's dead body onto his shoulder and began to dance '*tandava*' all over the Universe. The gods feared destruction of the whole Universe. Sensing the emergency, Vishnu despatched his *Sudarshan Chakra* to cut Sati's dead body into pieces. These pieces of Sati's body, along with her ornaments, fell down on 52 places, which were called *Shakti Peethas*. It is believed that her skeleton fell down in Kanchi. Kanchi enjoys the same veneration in the South as does Kashi in the North. It is, therefore, said that Kanchi and Kashi are like the two eyes of Shiva.

Incidentally, in Kanchi, Vishnu receives the same veneration as Shiva. The city is also known as Harihar Puri, and consists of two parts : Shiva Kanchi and Vishnu Kanchi.

Shiva Kanchi is quite near the Railway Station. *Sarvatirtha Sarovar* (The Most Revered Pilgrimage Pond) lies in this area. There is a small temple in the middle of the *sarovar*. People perform *Shraddha* and *Mundan* etc. at this *Sarovar*. After taking a bath in the *sarovar*, the devotees go for the Lord's *darshan*. The *sarovar* is surrounded by numerous temples.



Vishnu Kanchi lies about five kilometres from the Railway Station, and is smaller than Shiva Kanchi. It has 18 temples dedicated to Lord Vishnu. Shri Varadaraj Temple is the most famous of these, and is a sprawling complex. A pucca *Koti Teerth Sarovar* (Million Pilgrim Centres' Pond) is the landmark of Vishnu Kanchi.





Ekamreshwar Mandir is the holiest of the Kanchi temples. It lies next to the *Sarvatirtha Sarovar* in Shiv Kanchi. In this temple, in the month of *Jyaishtha* (mid-May to mid-June), a large fair is held and every Monday, the Lord is taken out in a procession. A very old mango tree stands tall in the courtyard, bound by a raised platform. On the platform is a small temple of Kamakshi Parvati.

It is said that once Goddess Parvati spread darkness throughout the Universe. Shiva got angry by such misuse of her powers by her and pronounced a curse upon her. Thereupon, Parvati sat under this mango tree and started worshipping a *Shivalinga* of sand made by her. Her unending penance pleased Lord Shiva, who accepted her again. The Ekamreshwar Temple perhaps owes its name to this mango — *amra*—tree.

Kamakshi Temple is another holy place of Kanchi. It is situated at about two furlongs from the Ekamreshwar Temple, and is one of the most renowned temples of South India. It is dedicated to Goddess Kamakshi, who is also known as *Adi Shakti* and *Kamakoti*. The temple was built by Adi Shankaracharya and also has a statue of his in it.

## PUSHKAR

Pushkar is believed to be the first pilgrim centre, or the *adi tirtha*. It is located in Rajasthan, about 11 kilometres from Ajmer. Mount Nag separates Pushkar from Ajmer. In the entire country, Pushkar is perhaps the only place where a temple of Lord Brahma is to be found.

Legend has it that Brahma was once scouting the earth for a befitting place to perform a *mahayagna*, and was not finding one. At long last, he reached a forest near Pushkar where the trees showered flowers upon him and welcomed him. This pleased Brahma, and he asked the tree to ask for a boon. The trees begged of him to let them stay there for ever. Brahma granted them this boon, and started staying there himself.

After a long time, Brahma came to know that a demon, Vajranash, was perpetrating atrocities on the people there and was not even sparing the children. The Lord intoned a *mantra* on a lotus flower, and killed the demon with it. In the process, parts of the flowers fell on three places which were later on known as *Jyaistha Pushkar* (Pushkar, the Senior), *Madhya Pushkar* (Pushkar, the Middle) and *Kanistha Pushkar* (Pushkar, the Junior), with their presiding deities being Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra, respectively.

To protect the *yagna* area from the demons, Brahma created high hills around Pushkar. They are known as Ratnagiri (in the South), Nilgiri (in the North), Sonchoora (in the West) and Suryagiri (in the East). Gods were posted on these hills to act as sentries.

Half-way through the *yagna*, Brahma's consort, Savitri, was to offer *ahuti*, since offering of an *ahuti* by the wife of one performing the *yagna* was mandatory. But she was nowhere to be found, and the auspicious moment was slipping by. Brahma then made a passing *Gujar* girl sit by his side as his wife and offer the *ahuti*. At that time, accompanied by Lakshmi and Parvati, Savitri appeared on the scene. She had gone to placate Lakshmi and Parvati,



who were angry because Brahma had forgotten to invite them for the *yogna*. When she saw the *Gujar* girl sitting by the side of Brahma, she lost temper and pronounced a curse upon Brahma, saying that he would be worshipped only in Pushkar. Soon thereafter, Savitri entered the Ratnagiri hill and became part of it. A spring gushed through the hill where Savitri had merged in it and that spring is known as *Savitri Jharna* even today. A temple dedicated to the memory of Savitri was later built by the side of this spring.



The ancient temple of Brahma was demolished by Emperor Aurangzeb. The present temple was built by Gokul Chand Parikh in 1809, and houses a four-headed idol of Brahma. Next to it, stands the idol of Savitri. In the courtyard of the temple, there are two beautiful statues of elephants to the right and the left, with Indra and Kuber mounted on their backs.

Pushkar has a pond known as *Brahma Sarovar*. It is considered to be very sacred, and the devout take a bath in it. The *sarovar* is surrounded by 52 ghats, Chhattri Ghat, Brahma Ghat, Mahadev Ghat, Bangla Ghat, Ram Ghat and Vishram Ghat among them being the more prominent ones.



## AMRITSAR

Situated on the north-western border of India, Amritsar is a prominent pilgrim centre of the Sikhs. It was founded in 1577 by Guru Ramdas, the fourth *Guru* of the Sikhs, who wanted to build a temple there for his followers. For this purpose, he selected a suitable site, and got a pond dug around it. But then, suddenly, he breathed his last, leaving his dream unfulfilled. The pond built by Guru Ramdas was named '*Amrit Sar*', or a pond of nectar, and the township coming up around it was called '*Guru Ka Nagar*'.

Afterwards the fifth *Guru*, and Guru Ramdas's son, Guru Arjun Dev, completed the pond and built a temple in deference to the wishes of his father. By and by, a city grew around the temple, which is now known as Amritsar. Maharaja Ranjit Singh contributed generously to the embellishment of the temple.

Earlier the temple was known as *Hari Mandir*, or the Temple of God. Maharaja Ranjit Singh gold-plated its dome, and the temple came to be known as *Swarna Mandir* or the Golden Temple. The devout also call it the *Darbar Sahib*. The Golden Temple is a prominent shrine of Amritsar, and is built in the centre of the pond. Around the temple is a wide and beautiful walkway or *Parikrama*. The walkway and the steps of the *Sarovar* are made of white marble.

The temple houses the holy book of the Sikhs, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The Sikhs revere it with utmost devotion, bow their heads before it, and get the traditional *prasad* known as *kadah prasad*. Near the inner gate of the Golden Temple is the '*Nishan Sahib*'. Next to '*Nishan Sahib*' is the '*Akal Takht*' where the sixth *Guru* of the Sikhs, Guru Har Gobind, vowed to take up arms against oppression of the Moghuls. Weapons of the Sikh *Gurus* are kept here. Hindus regard Amritsar and the Golden Temple as sacred as Varanasi and Vishwanath Temple.



Jalianwallah Bagh in Amritsar reminds us of India's struggle for freedom. Amritsar also has some famous Hindu temples which are fine specimens of architecture. Amritsar is, doubtless, a grand religious city of India.



## DWARKA

The city of Dwarka, situated on the western coast of Gujarat, is the fourth important *dharm* of India. Tides of the Arabian Sea wash its shores. In the eighth century A.D., Shankaracharya selected Dwarka for the renaissance of the *Sanatan Dharma*. Here he founded *Dwarkapeeth*, a Seat of Learning. Since that time, it is considered as one of the four important *dhams*, or pilgrim centres, founded by him.

In the olden days, Dwarka was known as *Dwaravati* and *Kusha-sthali*. The present-day Dwarka provides little hint of its past glory. In the Puranas, old Dwarka is portrayed as a city of plenty and affluence. At that time, it was known as 'the Golden City'. The Puranic lore has it that, when Krishna killed King Kansa in Mathura, Kansa's father-in-law, Jarasandha, invaded Mathura. Although Krishna defeated him in the battlefield, he did not concede his defeat; he invaded Mathura not once or twice, but seventeen times. Ultimately, Krishna decided to leave Mathura. Before leaving, Krishna founded a beautiful city in the middle of the sea and took all the people of Mathura to the new city. When Jarasandha invaded for the last time, Krishna fled the battlefield and dashed to Dwarka. Since that time, he came to be called '*Ranchhod*', or one who flees the battlefield. The present day Dwarka has a beautiful temple which bears the appellation *Ranchhod* for Krishna. About 140 feet high, this temple has two parallel walls running around it and the space between the walls is used for *parikrama* of the temple. The idol of *Ranchhodji* and the door-frames, etc. are inlaid with gold and silver.

Dwarkadheesh Temple is the most hallowed of all in Dwarka. The antiquity of some of its portions, like *Jagat Mandir* or *Nij Mandir*, is traced back to two thousand five hundred years. The main temple has five storeys, each 3 metres high. The pinnacle of the temple is 50 metres high, and the temple is supported on 60 pillars.

About thirty-two kilometres from the present day Dwarka is 'Bet Dwarka



This little island, situated in the 'Runn of Kutch' is known as *Raman Dweep*, or the Isle of the Lord. The facility of ferryboats is available for going from Dwarka to Bet Dwarka and back. Legend goes that Krishna used to conduct the 'affairs of State' from Dwarka and live with his family in Bet Dwarka.

To the west of Dwarka is a water tank called 'Gomti Talab' or 'Gomti Dwarka'. A similar tank known as 'Gopi Talab' is there in Bet Dwarka too. The mud of the tank, white in colour, is called 'Gopi Chandan', which literally means 'Sandlepaste from Gopi'. The devout apply it on their foreheads and chests to become 'sanctified'.



## AJMER SHARIF

The city of Ajmer in Rajasthan, the land of the warriors, is a holy place for the Muslims. It is situated on the slope of the Taragarh hills of the Aravali range. The city was founded by Ajaypal, a Chauhan king.

The mausoleum of the Sufi Saint, Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chisti, situated at the foot of the Taragarh hills, is a prominent pilgrim centre of the Muslims. It is also known as a *Dargah*.

Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chisti was born in the middle of the twelfth century A.D. A native of Afghanistan, he had migrated to Persia. His father passed away when he was a child. He opened his eyes in penury. Later on, he renounced every worldly possessions and became a mendicant. He became a disciple of Khwaja Usman, whose tomb lies in the holy Mecca. At about fifty years of age, Muin-ud-din returned to Afghanistan, from where he came over to India in the company of Mohammed Gouri, and settled down in Ajmer. The Muslims revere him as a divine being. He died at the ripe old age of 97 years. It is believed that six days before his death, he told his followers, "Now do not disturb me with any chores; I need rest very badly."

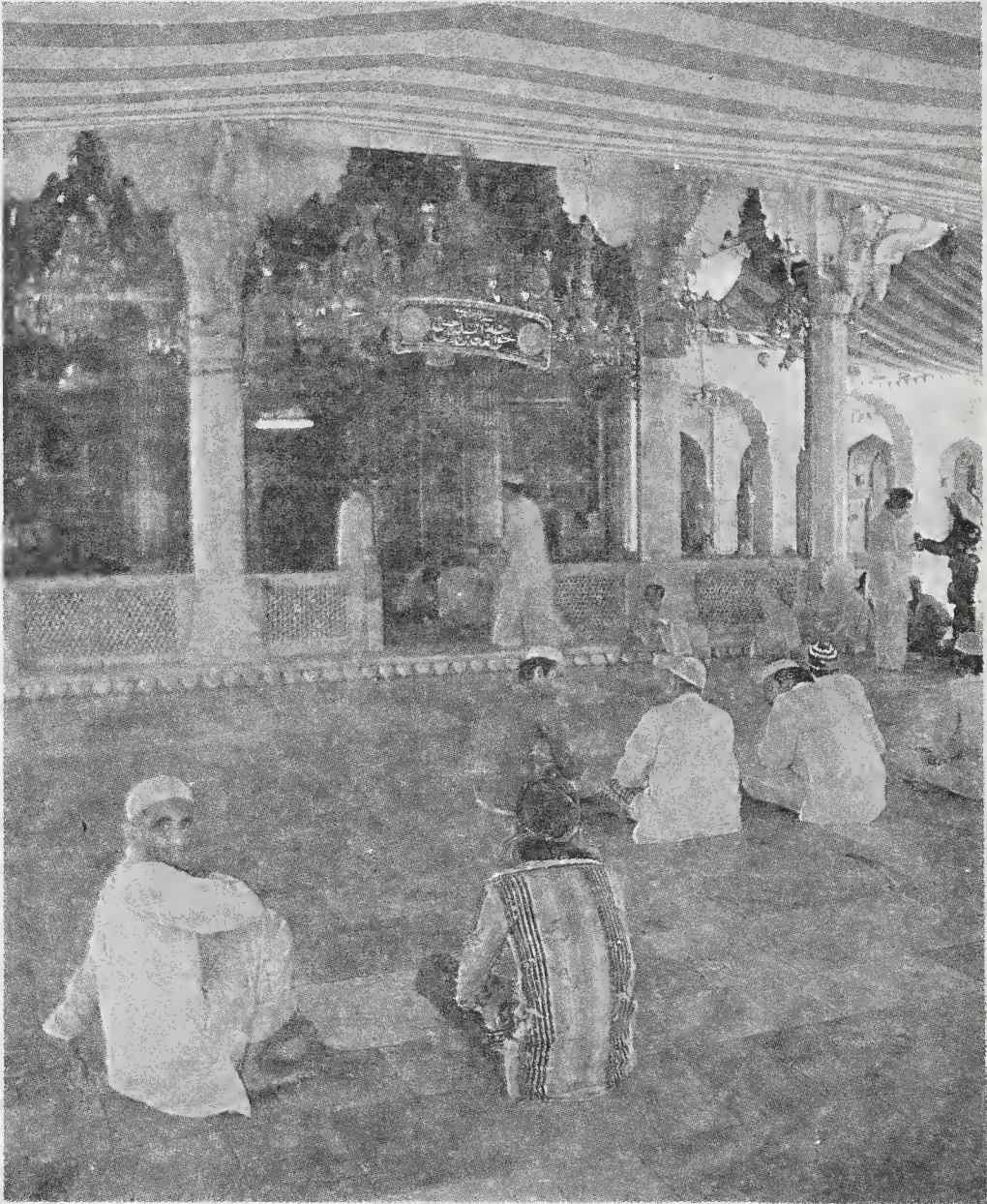
Thereafter, Muin-ud-din calmly reclined in his resting place, and after six days his followers found that he had breathed his last. Thereupon his followers buried him on that very spot.

Following his death, the masses started venerating the place of his burial as a hallowed place. His followers built for him a *dargah* at the place of his burial. In course of time, Emperors Akbar, Jahangir and Shahjahan kept extending the royal patronage, and expanding and modifying the *dargah*. The present shape of the *dargah* was given by Emperor Shahjahan, who also got a Jama Masjid of white marble built at this place. The famous *Begumi Dalan* in the city was built by Jahanara, the daughter of the Emperor.

In memory of the Khwaja, an elaborate *Urs* (or fair) is held in Ajmer Sharif



every year, generally in the month of May, in which Muslim devotees from India and abroad come and participate. On this occasion, *qawwalis* and devotional songs are sung by the devotees. People come to the *dargah* and beseech the Saint for all kinds of boons in the belief that whatever they ask for would be granted by the Khwaja. Legend has it that Emperor Akbar came here to beg for a son, and his wish was fulfilled. As a thanksgiving, the Emperor had renovated the *dargah*.





Two enormous cauldrons are embedded in the courtyard. *Prasad*, or *tabarruk*, is prepared in these cauldrons out of the donations from the rich. *Khir* made of milk, rice and dry fruits is the main *prasad* of the *dargah*, which is distributed among the devotees. Whatever is left is pillaged by the attendants from the cauldrons, and is known as the ceremony of 'loot'.

# RISHIKESH

Rishikesh has rightly been described as an adjunct pilgrim centre to Haridwar. It is not very far from Haridwar. Legend has it that once, a Brahmin named Devdutt underwent severe penance at Rishikesh, but one single misbelief denied him the fruit of his penance: he considered Shiva and Vishnu as two separate gods. Finally, one day Lord Shiva explained to him that Vishnu and Shiva are one and the same.

Bharat Temple of Rishikesh is a very ancient and sprawling temple. About two kilometres from the city is a place called 'Muni-ki-Reti' where one finds the holy *ashram* of Swami Shivananda. 'Swargashram' and 'Gita Bhavan' are at same distance from it. In Gita Bhavan, a *satsang* (congregation of the pious) is organised during the period from Chaitra (mid-March) to Ashadha (mid-June).

About two and a half kilometres further to 'Muni-ki-Reti' is the Lakshman Temple. To reach there, one has to cross the Ganga. One can get across by a cableway known as *Lakshman Jhoola* (Swing of Lakshman), which is used as a bridge.

Haridwar and Rishikesh are cities of temples and *ashrams*. These ashrams constitute an important linkage between the ancient and the modern. Sages and men of God stay in these *ashrams* which have been built by the rich and the devout. They are important for the congregations of saints and pilgrims, and also impart invaluable knowledge of morality, religion, philosophy, spirituality and practical lessons on Yoga that help one attain *Nirvana*. □□□





